

National Heritage Team of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Oral History Program  
Subject/USFW Retiree: Nevin Holmberg  
Date: July 09, 2002  
Interviewed by: Dorothe Norton

Dorothe Norton:  
We'll start out and I'm going to ask you your birthplace and date.

Nevin Holmberg:  
I was born in 1943, in Oakland, California.

Dorothe Norton:  
And your parents names?

Nevin Holmberg:  
My mother is Irma Vivian Studer Holmberg and my father is Conrad Walter Holmberg. And my mother was born in 1906, in Cordelia, California. My father was born in 1902, and he was born in Oakland, California.

Dorothe Norton:  
And what were their jobs and education, your father and your mother?

Nevin Holmberg:  
My father was a machinist and an electrician. And he worked for a number of vocations, but he retired from Department of the Air Force in 1961, after working at Hamilton Air Force Base. My mother retired in the early '70's, also from Hamilton Air Force Base, where she had done clerical work for many, many years.

Dorothe Norton:  
And where and how did you spend your earlier years as a child?

Nevin Holmberg:  
I was born in Oakland, and my parents left their shortly after I was born and moved to Hamilton Air Force Base in late 1944. We lived there until 1950, when we moved to Novato, California. And I lived there during my entire childhood, until I joined the Army in 1964.

Dorothe Norton:  
Okay, very good. Any hobbies, books, or events that influenced you the most, or jobs that you had as a child?

Nevin Holmberg:  
Hobbies; I was always an enthusiastic hunter and fisherman. I used to spend a lot of times hiking in the hills around my home. Of course, like all boys, I was into model airplanes for awhile. I always enjoyed reading; I don't know that anything in particular that I read that had some sort of marked influence on my life at that point.

Dorothe Norton:  
What high school did you go to and graduate?

Nevin Holmberg:  
I graduated in 1961, from Novato High School.

Dorothe Norton:  
And what university did you attend?

Nevin Holmberg:  
I went to Marine Junior College for several years. And then after I got out of the Army I went to Humboldt State University, where I graduated with bachelors and masters and science degree in wildlife management.

Dorothe Norton:  
Any mentors or courses that you took that stuck with you, which influenced you to go into the future jobs you held with Fish and Wildlife?

Nevin Holmberg:  
Well besides the basic biological professional scientific preparations that I received at the university, I think that my part-time job as an undergraduate as a bill collector for Montgomery Ward probably gave me a lot of good experience in terms of being able to meet and deal with people of shall we say somewhat unusual and different backgrounds that I'd been used to all my life. And so I think working there gave me a lot of experience in dealing with a wide variety of people with different sorts of outlooks and so on, and really gave me experience in working with a broad spectrum of humanity.

Dorothe Norton:  
And you were in the Army you tell me?

Nevin Holmberg:  
Yes.

Dorothe Norton:  
And any interesting duty stations overseas?

Nevin Holmberg:  
Well I was a nuclear weapons electronics technician for 2 years in Germany, going there after my year of training here in the states.

Dorothe Norton:  
And was the military service related anyway to your employment with the Fish and Wildlife Service?

Nevin Holmberg:

Well other than the Veteran's Preference that you got when you applied for a job, again it was experience in working with different sorts of people.

Dorothe Norton:

And then what is the name, birthplace, and date of yours spouse?

Nevin Holmberg:

Carol Reich Holmberg, born in 1954, in Centre County, Pennsylvania.

Dorothe Norton:

And when, where, and how did you meet?

Nevin Holmberg:

At the time I was working in Washington, D.C. as Branch Chief for the branch of Federal Permits and Licenses in the Division of Ecological Services. In those days the Washington office folks, usually the assistant director and several staffers would be tasked with going to different regions, and visiting a couple of field offices within each region and doing what was called a regional evaluation. And it was during one of these regional evaluations in July of 1984 that Carol and I met. She was a secretary for the Ecological Services office in State College, Pennsylvania at the time.

Dorothe Norton:

And when and where did you married?

Nevin Holmberg:

We were married in October of 1988, in State College, Pennsylvania.

Dorothe Norton:

Do you have any children?

Nevin Holmberg:

I have 2 children by a previous marriage.

Dorothe Norton:

And what are they doing now?

Nevin Holmberg:

My older boy Nevin, he is living temporarily in Buffalo, New York. And he and his wife will be, are planning, at least right now, to relocate permanently to the Portland, Oregon area once his assignment is complete in October. My younger boy Eric is a draftsman in Greenbay, Wisconsin. Both kids are married and no grandchildren.

Dorothe Norton:

Okay. So why did you want to work for Service?

Nevin Holmberg:

I always had an interest in conservation of fish and wildlife, and I thought the best place to do that sort of thing was with the federal government. My parents having been federally employed it sort of gave me a, I guess, predisposition to go federal as opposed to go state. And I saw more career opportunities with the feds than with any of the states that I was aware of. I did have some experience working with CA Fish and Game, California Department of Fish and Game, when I was a grad student, and thought that I'd rather go to work for the feds.

Dorothe Norton:

And where did you go from there?

Nevin Holmberg:

Well in the summer of 1971, at that time the Division of River Basin Studies hired nationally about 150 biologists. And a number of us were hired from the Sacramento office, which is where I started.

Dorothe Norton:

And what other duty stations and positions did you...?

Nevin Holmberg:

In January of '74, three of us from the River Basin's office in Sacramento were transferred down to Corona Del Mar, where we formed the nucleus of the new Southern California Field Office of River Basin Studies. At the time the River Basin's office in Sacramento was thought to be too big and be unmanageable. There were 22 biologists and supervisors working there. So for the moment anyway they reduced the size by sending 3 of us down south, where we formed this new office.

In '75, I went to Atlanta regional office, where I was a staffer there for a couple of years. Then I went to Washington, D.C. I was there from 1975 to '77, I think that's right. Anyway, I was a staffer in the office in the regional office in the ES Program for a couple of years there. And after going to Washington, D.C. in '77... I'm getting these dates all fouled up.

Anyway, after a couple of years in Washington, D.C. as a staffer, I went to Honolulu as the senior staff biologist in the ES office there. I was there for about 3 years as senior staff biologist, and was promoted then to field supervisor.

In 1981, I left Honolulu and went to the Ecological Services Field Office in Greenbay, Wisconsin, where I was field supervisor there for a couple of years.

In '83, I went to Washington, D.C., where I stayed for 4 years as chief of the branch of Federal Permits and Licenses within the Division of Ecological Services.

In 1987, I went to Juneau, Alaska as field supervisor for Ecological Services, and that's where I stayed for 11 years, until I retired.

Dorothe Norton:

What were the pay and benefits like?

Nevin Holmberg:

When I came on in 1971, I was a GS7, and I was paid at the rate of \$8,500.00 a year. Which was a pretty darned good salary at that time since in Sacramento you could buy a basic starter 3-bedroom home in a nice neighborhood you could start out around \$13,000.00.

Dorothe Norton:

Did you socialize with the people that you worked with?

Nevin Holmberg:

Throughout my career yes, the office always seemed to be the readiest source of socialization. And of course moving as frequently as I did for as long as I did, you basically always were socializing with the folks in the office.

Dorothe Norton:

And how did your career affect your family life?

Nevin Holmberg:

I think it was positive and negative, positive from the standpoint that the boys were able to see a lot of areas of the country that they wouldn't have ordinarily been able to see. While in school, and because they changed schools every couple of years, at least up until the time they went through high school, they had to develop social skills that I think a lot of kids that are sedentary throughout their education don't have to develop. So I think that educationally it was good, I think socially it was good. It was also difficult too on them emotionally, having to be uprooted and moving every few years.

Dorothe Norton:

And what kinds of training did you receive for your jobs?

Nevin Holmberg:

There was never, in any of the positions I ever received, with the exception my initial supervisorial position, there was never any formal training for the job I was doing. When first hired in '71, I think, if memory serves, there were 8 biologists hired by Sacramento at the time. And so we came into an office that had 14 or 15 people. All of the sudden there were another 8 brand new faces showing up every day. There was no way that with the given workload that was there that they could really provide training of any formal nature. Basically we were given manuals to read, laws, statutes, regulations, and so forth to read to enable us to do our jobs. We were given a certain amount of coaching by the folks, the senior biologists that were there, the GS9 and the GS11's and 12's and so forth. But nobody really sat down and said, "This is what we do and why we do it." You sort of picked it up as you went along, and you were sort of thrown into the deep end of the swimming pool to start with.

Dorothe Norton:  
What hours did you work?

Nevin Holmberg:  
Whatever hours were necessary.

Dorothe Norton:  
What were your day-to-day duties?

Nevin Holmberg:  
When I first came onboard the fellow who was the assistant field supervisor called me into his office, as he did to each of the new hires, and talked to him a little bit about what's your background, what's your educational experience, and so on and so forth. And I had gotten my masters degree, or was getting my masters degree I should say, in shorebird ecology. And so I had a lot of experience, academic experience and some field experience in salt marsh ecology and that sort of thing. And because I had that experience, and at the time the Sacramento office was heavily involved in projects in the southern California area that were affecting salt marsh wetlands that were quickly disappearing, I got shoved into that arena. And so basically I was working on the Corps of Engineers Regulatory Program, and also in the Corps of Engineers Federal Project arena, water project kind of things. And so basically that was what I was doing, essentially worked based on the requirements of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act.

Dorothe Norton:  
Okay. Any special tools or instruments that you used in your work?

Nevin Holmberg:  
A brain! And that was about it. We didn't have much in the line of field equipment, I don't even remember if the Sacramento office had a boat at the time. We had some basic field sampling gear that we used in southern California, but otherwise not a lot. I think, quite frankly, that in some cases we were expected to do an awful lot of dry lab, which none of us really cared for. When we opened up the southern California office I bought a book and it was entitled, *The Polychaetous Annelids of Southern California*, and it was a beautiful scientific work on marine polychaetes. And the regional office had a fit that we bought it because the book cost \$70.00.

Dorothe Norton:  
Did you witness any new Service inventions or innovations?

Nevin Holmberg:  
Well throughout my career there was always the ever present reorganization that occurred with depressing frequency. Management changes, changes in management approaches. We went from line staff management to program management to area offices to, you know, the dissolution of the area offices, back to line staff management under Frank Dunkle. And then of course the concept of ecosystem management begun in the mid-90's, early '90's.

Dorothe Norton:  
Did you work with animals at all?

Nevin Holmberg:  
Individual critters very little, not until actually in Alaska; we were a registration station for the Alaska Indians that were allowed to take sea otters. And so every now and then you'd have some guy bring in a couple dozen dead otters into your office, you know that they had shot. A lot of them were taking out around Sitka and Icy Strait and so and so forth. And they'd bring them in frozen. Typically what we would get would be frozen skins, frozen hides and skulls. And so when they would bring them in typically they would be in one state or another of thawing and dripping all over the place. And so that was our dealing with animals. And then of course we also dealt on occasion with bald eagles, injured and sick eagles and whatnot that would be picked up.

Dorothe Norton:  
What support did you receive locally, regionally, federally?

Nevin Holmberg:  
Support in what way?

Dorothe Norton:  
Like the work that you were doing.

Nevin Holmberg:  
We typically in practically every office, every field office I worked in had good public support; the public was generally behind us. And I would say that that was true in each of the offices, with the one exception being Honolulu. Our support, public support over there was minimal. It's not that they were hostile, it's just that nobody really cared as far as I could tell among the public. The support we got from the central office, from Washington, D.C., was generally positive. And when it came to the regional office, the regional office support that we got, it varied a lot based upon the, for want of a better term, the philosophical approach of the individuals with whom one dealt. When you dealt with the regional office staff, the working men and women in the regional offices, it was generally pretty good. And I mean that from the standpoint of the biologists and so forth with whom with dealt within the Ecological Services and other programs. It was generally, not always, but generally pretty good. When you started dealing with the regional office management it was sketchy.

Dorothe Norton:  
How do you think the agency-community relations were?

Nevin Holmberg:  
The relation between...

Dorothe Norton:

The agency and the people living in the communities where you worked.

Nevin Holmberg:

I think it varied, I think it varied to a degree, depending on how much outreach you try to do within the field office. The principle community that the field offices, and I'm speaking now strictly with Ecological Services because I had no experience in the other programs, the Ecological Field Office, Ecological Services Field offices generally had good relations with the public, the general public, the taxpaying public. The regional office, that relationship basically was centered upon the regional director, maybe the assistant regional directors for the various programs. They were typically the ones who had the public contact if you will. And that was generally through the press as opposed to the on the ground one-on-one with the average taxpaying citizen. Again there's some variation there. The central office, their principle public was Congress and the congressional staff.

Dorothe Norton:

What projects were you ever involved in?

Nevin Holmberg:

More than I can remember. As a biologist working in field offices; Sacramento, Corona Del Mar, Honolulu, I worked on a whole slew of Corps of Engineers projects, water projects of one sort or another; flood control projects, water supply projects, and so forth. As time progressed, I found myself working more and more in the regulatory arena, the Corp Regulatory Program, the Section 10, Section 404 Permit aspect of it. Once I left the field and went to Washington, D.C. as Chief of Permits and Licenses then all I worked with was the Corp Regulatory Program, and to a lesser extent the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

Dorothe Norton:

Were these major issues?

Nevin Holmberg:

The Corp Regulatory Program was always wrapped in controversy. And so yeah, there were major issues. We were... When I was in Washington we did a lot of work providing testimony to Congress, doing that all the time.

Dorothe Norton:

And that was how you resolved these?

Nevin Holmberg:

That's how we tried to resolve the issues. Many of the issues I'm sure continue.

Also, one of the other responsibilities we had in D.C. was to deal with what were called elevations, these are permit issues unresolvable at the field or regional level. And so they come into Washington, and we would get a dozen or so of those every year when I was



there. And they were always both politically contentious, contentious between the applicant and the Service or the applicant and the Corps or whatever. A lot of times there would be a lot of public interest in what was going on.

Federal projects, the nature of federal projects, Corps Water Development Projects was such that they went on forever and ever. There were people that started their career on a given project and ended their career on a given project. You know, the Sacramento Delta Water Diversion Project has gone on forever, and as far as I know is still going on. Garrison Diversion is another one of those things that people spent 30 years diddling with and whatnot. So then you didn't have the degree of immediacy and controversy with federal projects that you did with the permits and licensing aspect.

Dorothe Norton:

What was the major impediment to your job or/and your career?

Nevin Holmberg:

Well it's two vastly different things. Major impediment to the job I would have to say was regional management. It was, in relative terms, easily, more easy, easier to deal with other agencies; Corps of Engineers, Forest Service, and Bureau of Reclamation. It was easier to deal with these other agencies than it was to get the support out of our own regional office. The regional directors were typically subjected to considerable political pressure. And unfortunately some of these folks were career managers as opposed to resource managers.

Dorothe Norton:

And who were your supervisors? And were any of them an individual who helped shape your career?

Nevin Holmberg:

I had a lot of great supervisors. Two that shaped my career the most I think were, or two that I remember most vividly I should say, were Norm Chupp, who was the field supervisor in Sacramento when I first went there. And then my supervisor in southern California was Russ Earnest. And then when Russ left the next supervisor I had was a fellow by the name of Stan Zschomler, who was in the Dakotas for a long time after he left southern California, and I think he actually came from the Minneapolis office to the office in southern California.

Dorothe Norton:

Oh, I think I know who he is.

Nevin Holmberg:

Those three supervisors I think were three of the most influential, and I would have to say they led by example.

Dorothe Norton:

Who were some other people that you knew? Would they be able to work for the Service like today?

Nevin Holmberg:

I'm not sure I understand your question.

Dorothe Norton:

It's just anybody that you know that you think would be able to work for the Service today? Not necessarily your age, but any young people, any people you know that you think would be better with the Service then whatever they're doing.

Nevin Holmberg:

I can't think of anybody right off hand that would meet that standard.

Dorothe Norton:

Do you remember what any of the Presidents, Secretary of the Interior, or Directors of the Fish and Wildlife that you served under?

Nevin Holmberg:

One that I could never forget was Ray Arnett, who was the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks under the Reagan Administration, at least for the first part of it. When I was in D.C. in '83 to '87, he was the assistant secretary for most of that time. And he was an interesting person to deal with. I think that when the Reagan Administering first came to Washington, they had a pretty dim view of Ecological Services and what we were doing. And I think that their view of who we were and what we stood for changed by about 180 degrees after being there for awhile when they realized that what they'd been told about us was not exactly what was occurring. And they became very supportive in much of what we did.

Dorothe Norton:

Good. Did you think changes in administration affected the work that you did?

Nevin Holmberg:

Oh yeah, undoubtedly. I think there were a number of things that occurred that had significant changes. And I think starting with the Civil Service Reform Act under the Carter Administration that basically removed upper management from the basic Civil Service system and put them into the Senior Executive Service. I think that that did a lot to separate upper management from the rest of the worker bees within the Service. And I think that by entering this select group of individuals that suddenly did not have some of the job protections that the rest of us in the GS13, GS14, and below had, that they were far more sensitive to political manipulation.

Dorothe Norton:

What do you think was the high point of your career?

Nevin Holmberg:  
It was all high.

Dorothe Norton:  
Very good.

Nevin Holmberg:  
And I mean that in terms of the work I did, the resource conservation work that I did. I'm real proud of it. I enjoyed doing it, I looked forward to Monday morning to go to work. There were aspects of my job that I didn't like, but by and large it was an extremely positive experience.

Dorothe Norton:  
Did you ever consider you had a low point?

Nevin Holmberg:  
Yeah, I think there were low points. I think the constant struggle to gain and keep regional office support for ongoing conservation work, it just, it never ended. You always had to drag these people along kicking and screaming. And no matter how much you went to the regional office and presented information as to what you were doing, you still had to tell them over and over again. And as an old physics professor used to say, we had to tell them things that, you know, knowledge they should have been born with. We shouldn't have had to do it. I found an attitude in some of the regional directors and in some of upper management, not just limited to regional directors, but in regional management and in some cases even in the central office that Ecological Services was somehow working in adversarial realm with the other agencies and like that. And certainly there was adversarial aspect to it. But that was established by law, not by the people within Ecological Services. I certainly got tired of having to hold the hand and prop up regional management to try and get them to support what we were doing in terms of fish and wildlife conservation when what we were doing was what we were required to do by law.

Dorothe Norton:  
Okay Nevin can you tell me did you have any dangerous or frightening experiences? What was the most dangerous or frightening?

Nevin Holmberg:  
I think the most frightening was getting up in public meetings when the public was hostile. I don't know, I wouldn't say frightening is the word, I think nerve-racking is closer.

Dorothe Norton:  
How about humorous, your most humorous experience?

Nevin Holmberg:

Most humorous experience... I have to think about that for a minute or two. There were, you know there was always something going on that was humorous. We used to do a lot of practical joking around when I was in the office in Washington. I remember one time, you must have known Dick Huber?

Dorothe Norton:

Sure.

Nevin Holmberg:

He had been the Chief of Permits and Licenses in Washington in the early '70's. And when they formed the Office of Biological Services, Dick was transferred to Minneapolis. And he was back in D.C. on some business trip, while he was there one of the fellows in the office stuffed a pair of pantyhose on the inside jacket pocket of his sport coat. And that wasn't discovered until his wife went to send his clothes to the cleaners!

Dorothe Norton:

I would think that would be pretty humorous.

Nevin Holmberg:

And, you know, we get this panicked phone call from Dick Huber saying that we had to call his wife and tell her what we had done!

Dorothe Norton:

Where do you see the Service heading do you think in the next decade?

Nevin Holmberg:

I'm not sure. I know where it needs to head, I don't know if it's going to go there. I think that the Ecosystem Management System, for want of a better term, it was formed in the mid-90's, early 90's. It came into being in the early '90's with no concept of what it was, where it was going, what it was supposed to accomplish. On one occasion I asked the director, you know, "What is it you want us to do?" And her response was, and I'm quoting, "Anything you want to do." Which doesn't give one a lot of direction because there was at the time absolutely no direction coming out of the regional office. And we spent weeks and weeks crashing and banging, coming up with an ecosystem management plan.

And as far as I know, all that ecosystem management ever accomplished was, 1.) It gave you an excuse to have a meeting; meeting after meeting after meeting. It gave a lot of people in regional offices jobs and grades that they had little or no background and experience to handle, in positions that didn't need to be filled and handled anyway because they didn't do anything in terms of putting any kind of dirt on the ground, saving a critter or whatever. The regional offices have become so bloated with folks at high grades that don't do anything productive. The mission of the Fish and Wildlife Service is

supposed to be conservation of fish and wildlife resources, and if that occurs as a result of ecosystem management I'll eat your hat.

If it does anything to enhance our ability to work cooperatively with other agencies; state, federal, local, whatever, than it has a positive aspect. The question I have is, "Are we getting our money's worth out of it? Are we now spending \$10.00 to accomplish what heretofore we spent \$1.00 to accomplish?"

Dorothe Norton:

Okay. Well Nevin I guess we're going to call this a good interview, and I thank you very much for all of the time it has taken, and was very happy to meet you.

Nevin Holmberg:

Thank you.

Dorothe Norton:

Would you like to get a copy of this when it's been typed to have for your files?

Nevin Holmberg:

That will be fine.

Dorothe Norton:

Okay, very good. Thank you so much.

**KEY WORDS:** Nevin Holmberg; resource conservation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Branch Chief of Federal Permits and Licenses, Division of Ecological Services, California Department of Fish and Game Division of River Basin Studies, Ecological Services, Sacramento River Basin Studies, Southern California River Basin Studies, Washington, D.C. Ecological Services, Honolulu Ecological Services, Greenbay Ecological Services, shorebird ecology, salt marsh ecology, salt marsh wetlands, Corps of Engineers Regulatory Program, Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, *The Polychaetous Annelids of Southern California*, Frank Dunkle, Section 10 Permit, Section 404 Permit, Chief of Permits and Licenses, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Corps Water Development Projects, Sacramento Delta Water Diversion Project, Garrison Diversion Project, Norman Chupp, Russ Earnest, Stan Zschomler, Assistant Secretary of Interior Ray Arnett, Reagan Administration, Civil Service Reform As compared to, Carter Administration, basic Civil Service system, Senior Executive Service, Chief of Permits and Licenses Dick Huber, Ecosystem Management System,